



Onondaga County Legislature

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PUBLIC HEARING REGARDING THE PROPOSED DISCONTINUATION OF THE COUNTY OPERATION OF THE STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM May 13, 2008

LEGISLATORS PRESENT: Mr. Lesniak, Mr. Kraft, Mr. Meyer, Mrs. Rapp, Mr. Rhinehart, Mr. Buckel,
Mr. Corbett, Mr. Stanczyk, Mr. Holmquist, Mr. DeMore, Mr. Warner, Mr. Jordan, Mr. Laguzza,
Mr. Masterpole, Ms. Williams

LEGISLATORS ABSENT: Mr. Stott, Mr. Kilmartin, Mr. Kinne, Mrs. Winslow

Chairman Meyer called the meeting to order at 6:30 PM.

DONNA LUCENTE (Student Assistance Program): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

ERICA COATES (Preventive Services Supervisor): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

JEREMY KLEMANSKI (Syracuse Behavioral Healthcare): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

SYLVIA MATOUSEK (North Syracuse Education Association): Ms. Matousek said they are fortunate to have three Student Assistance counselors at work in their district. Referred to the time when the Legislature asked their district to employ Student Assistance counselors in 1985. Counselors were to do three things: deal with substance abuse on the part of students, do individual counseling and do suicide assessments and referrals; all under the protection of confidentiality. They integrated them within the schools, they work tremendously well with them and they have met their initial objective which was to intervene on the front line with kids who were in trouble and to save future dollars by cutting down the amount of health care and counseling that was going to be needed, no question that the program has accomplished that. The County is going to take the 5% that they pay (about \$356,000) and shift that someplace else to hire these people, that is not good for employees. Contracting out may be the way of the world, but it doesn't make it right. There will be a point in time when those employees will lose benefits, when their pay will be reduced and working for less than they are now, these are not high paid people. Concerned with the quality of the program – from 1985 to 1991 when independent agents were working in the schools at this same job, 25 of those therapists left. In the last seventeen years they have only lost 12 of their Student Assistance counselors; continuity and integration is important, particularly with such a fragile population as these kids, when they are looking for familiar faces and people who integrate well into the schools. She asked the Legislature to consider those points. The amount this program costs this county is miniscule, probably less than one half of one percent and the program works, why are we playing with it. Asked to continue to let them have access to these people who do a wonderful job for kids.

ROBERT LONG (Onondaga County Mental Health): Read into the record two letters that they received from counties that are currently operating Student Assistance programs via contract with not-for-profit agencies. *LETTERS ON FILE.*

TOM MCKEOWN (Human Services Leadership Council and Arise): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

LORA McCOOEY (County retiree): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

PAT LEONE (Contact Community Services): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

SUE O'BRYAN (Student Assistance Program): *STATEMENT ON FILE*

TONI LYN BRAUCHLE (Can Teen, North Syracuse Central School District): Ms. Brauchle said she is the coordinator of Youth Services for the Town of Cicero and she oversees the Can Teen. Hoping the Legislators see that

the folks behind them, especially the youth, feel that this is an important decision. At the Can Teen they see young people every day who are building relationships with the Student Assistance counselors, that is an important relationship to them. It takes five adults to support a young person into a healthy adult, if those Student Assistance counselors can help in that process, more power to folks that are willing to do it. She can't imagine using a system different than what they have; it has taken a long time to build a report with the Student Assistance counselors. When she has a child who needs referral, she knows the person on the other end of the line that she can call to say she needs that person to help the child, and they know that they are there to help as well. Asked that the Legislators keep them in the back of their mind when making the decision realizing that stability and continuity is key for the young people they see every day, they deserve the same solid relationships that other kids across the county deserve. What they are doing right now is working very well.

COLLEEN WHEATON (CSEA Region 5): STATEMENT ON FILE

JASON HAGERMAN (Student at Baker High School in Baldwinsville): STATEMENT ON FILE

JACQUIE TUFTS (former student – Baker High School, Baldwinsville): The Student Assistance Program is important to the community of Onondaga County and hopes to see it expand some day. There is always some place to go, somebody to talk to, there is a level of openness and confidentiality when you put your trust in them. With the Student assistance Program so many doors have opened, organizations have been formed to help people come together and bond during certain occasions with similar interests. There is always a place to learn and grow in a positive way, has seen so many students stay in high school because there is someone there to talk to when you are struggling, someone there to support you and your decisions, to help you go through life with a positive attitude. Hopes to see this program for many years to come.

PHIL D'ANGELO (Superintendent, Skaneateles Central School District): Spoke on behalf of the students in his district and one of their employees. All the schools districts in Onondaga County are different but they all have similar needs. In Skaneateles they have one counselor in their primary school who works with the students on social and emotional needs, have one counselor in the intermediate school who looks out for their students, have two in the middle school, in the high school they have three guidance counselors who are taking care of student needs such as looking for college placement, career orientation. There is one counselor through the Student Assistance Program for the students who have anger management issues, those who are dealing with a tragic loss, students who are experiencing separation or divorce in their family, others who are dealing with drug and alcohol abuse issues, etc. It exists in every school district in Onondaga County. They utilize their Student Assistance counselor, Marcy Weed, in many ways – preparing them for the prom and making good, strong choices. Their students gravitate to Ms. Weed, when it comes to the emotional piece; she steps up to the plate. The program is not cookie cutter; they have the autonomy to customize it to the needs of Skaneateles. Right now the system is working tremendously, realizes that we are all in distress budget wise things are extremely tight. Would like to see the County continue the program. Understands the school districts would have an integral role if the County moves to the RFP process, supports that. Given the choice, let's keep it the way it is, cannot afford to lose it. When students have needs, need to address them in a timely, efficient and effective manner; that is happening right now.

PATRICIA LAKE (Student Assistance Program): Ms. Lake said she is a counselor in the North Syracuse School District. Presented a petition showing overwhelming support from personnel in every building in the district and a summary of the points in this petition; also submitted a letter from the Syracuse Association of Psychiatric Nurses. **(LETTER ON FILE).**

KATE McKENNA (County Resident, Syracuse Teachers Assn.): Asked the Legislators to consider three questions: who wins, who loses and who decides. Those who have children and those who work with children believe they are the future – they walk the talk. Legislators are being asked to act on a cost savings proposal that may not actually save any money and may diminish the prospects for our future. The students are our future and deserve the consistent quality that the counselors in the Student Assistance Program can offer. When she worked at Nottingham High School they had the good fortune to have an incredible counselor from SAP who assimilated seamlessly into the faculty, the children trusted her and her ability to help them with the issues they were facing on a daily basis and she had that veil of confidentiality, which is so important in order to come forward to say they need help. There are distinct roles to be filled by County government and community based organizations; elected officials have the responsibility to provide services to their constituents; community based organizations have an interest in

expanding their client base to perhaps increase the size and visibility of their organizations or for whatever possible reasons they have. With no financial gain to be seen by the County in this proposal, one question will be who will be advantaged by this sub contracting of County services to our children. Surely, somewhere along the way, somebody is going to be advantaged, frankly does not believe it is going to be our children. Our students notice who is there for them, who cares for them; replacing staff is more complex than restocking shelves. It is the equation of the students who need services that are being provided well and the people who are providing those services, the system is not broken. It is ultimately each Legislator who makes the decision, hopes they will take into account who wins and who loses and she is hoping it won't be our kids.

PHIL GRAHAM (President, CSEA Local 834): He is proud to represent the Student Assistance people. We are looking at a program that is a model for many programs across the state. There are not savings to be made in this local program; dollars will be shifted from County government to non-for-profits. They met with the County after they learned of this proposal to privatize this program, asked why they didn't come to them beforehand. The union is willing to work with the County to work out any differences, any flexibilities they need to have. Mr. Graham referred to the County's yearly report where it says that this is a model program with lots of efficiencies and here they are trying to cut the program, questioned when it became OK to contract out successful programs. If the County had some personal issues, they could have come to the union to try to work out the issues. They see no advantage to contracting out this program and see many disadvantages. The RFP doesn't guarantee that any of these counselors will keep their jobs; if they do keep them, what guarantee is there that they will be in the same school districts where they currently are. The bonds that the counselors have built up over years of counseling these students will be broken and at what cost. They feel the county Department of Mental Health gives the counselors many human and financial advantages that these non-for-profits couldn't offer. At a time when growing up in society brings many pressures that many of us never had when we were in school, he urged the County Legislature to not throw these students to the whim of contractors who many or may not have the expertise to run such an important program. Urged them to say no to contracting out these services, let the County and the union work out any programs they can.

LAURIE BYRNE (Registered Nurse, Corcoran High School): Ms. Byrne said she has worked with Ms. McIntyre, SAP counselor, many years and has referred hundreds of students to her and she has never once said she is busy; she sees them immediately or before she goes home that day; that speaks volumes about her and her dedication. Added that Ms. McIntyre takes kids to dentist, doctor appointments on her own time after school; also is involved with many committees at Corcoran – Wellness Committee, Life Committee, Crisis Committee. Ms. Byrne asked to keep Ms. McIntyre at Corcoran.

ROB COPP (currently in Army): Mr. Copp said that when he went to Corcoran High School, he used to be a troublemaker, skipped school, had bad arguments and was angry. He was going down the wrong path and was referred to Ms. McIntyre, a Student Assistance counselor; she turned him around, helped him go back to his classes, finish his homework and get through the days (ended up on the Honor Roll a couple of times), she helped him control his anger. Mr. Copp urged the Legislators to keep this program and read a letter from Syracuse Police Officer Paul Kluge asking the Legislators to keep the Student Assistant Program – **LETTER ON FILE**.

DAVID CECILE (Principal, Henninger High School): Mr. Cecile said he wanted to talk about the person and the job, recognized Ms. Sue Hurwitz who was present at the hearing. Said that Ms. Hurwitz has been with the program at Henninger for seventeen years. One of the key people he talks to every day is Ms. Hurwitz because they need to know what is going on with their students, some who have very high needs and some who just need a place to go to speak to somebody. They have 1,650 kids, 175 staff members, five administrators, six guidance counselors (who do career, academic and college counseling); there is very little time in the day to do what the Student Assistance counselors do. They have very high needs, a variety of different income levels from very low poverty, 65%-70% get reduced lunch. A lot of their kids don't have the opportunity to go anywhere else to receive the services they get from Sue Hurwitz. One of the things he has learned, as an educator, is that it is not really about the position; many times it is about the person who is in that position. If this is outsourced they are going to find some very capable people, are going to find people who are in transition who are going from one job to another. Ms. Hurwitz is one of their key people – see her in the hallways every day, cafeteria, at games, graduations, proms, goes to kids homes, does a lot of things that they can't find the time in their busy schedules to do. He would like to see this program continue the way it has for the last seventeen years.

LAURA KINLOCK (Student Assistance Program): **STATEMENT ON FILE**

RYAN GALLAGHER (Student, Corcoran High School): Mr. Gallagher said he was present on behalf of Shelagh McIntyre. She is a person that you can tell anything to, someone you can trust, he had some things he buried away for about 8 to 9 years and never told anyone. She has helped him partially get over it. There is always somebody in her office, she is there for everyone – teachers, students, everybody. Mr. Gallagher submitted a petition with 158 signatures in support of keeping this program and Ms. McIntyre in their school, because she is vital to their school – **ON FILE.**

KATHY ELMER (Psychiatric Social Worker): STATEMENT ON FILE

TIM BARSTOW (Retired Superintendent, Onondaga Central and Marcellus): This is a great program that the County has. Now does consulting in South Carolina and talks about this program. Student Assistance Program opens the doors to other County services; there are some great private agencies, but there is something very unique about this program. The counselors become members of the faculty, makes all the difference that there is someone right there when something happens, don't have to pick up the phone and deal with bureaucracy. It is a valuable program and one the Legislators should give very careful consideration before they outsource. Compares it to outsourcing for buses, not the same as having a neighbor or somebody you know. who lives in the community. Mr. Barstow said it sounds like there are some issues in terms of contract issues with flexibility, advised that they have the County lawyers work with the CSEA people. This is an excellent program; think carefully before they throw it away, because kids will be the ones to be hurt by that.

STEVEN GRAMET (Dir. Pupil Services, Syracuse City Schools): Student Assistance Program has been working well for Syracuse schools for quite a few years. There is one Student Assistance counselor in each of the four high schools, they are the only social workers, these individuals are extremely effective and support their students in a variety of ways including individual, small group counseling and by providing drug and alcohol abuse assessments. The counselors see over 400 students each year. Their major concern is continued needed support for their students, each of the counselors has become a key member of the high schools.

DR. GAIL LAMBERT (Special Educator, Baldwinsville Schools): STATEMENT ON FILE

BETH SZLOSEK (Guidance Counselor, Baker High School, Baldwinsville): STATEMENT ON FILE

KIM MOORHEAD (Parent, Corcoran High School): Ms. Moorhead said that she was present to support Mrs. McIntyre. People need to pay more attention to their kids in their schools and families because a lot of kids have problems. Kids need a person they can go to who cares and one they trust, Mrs. McIntyre is just that, letting her go would be a huge mistake. Please keep the Student Assistance Program with the County Mental Health Department to ensure the program stays the way it is, why get rid of something that works.

SHAIQUESS McGLOWN (Student, Corcoran High School): Last September as she transitioned into high school, she was very lucky to meet Ms. McIntyre. Ms. McGlown said when she is overwhelmed or having a problem, Ms. McIntyre is always willing to listen, give her advice and put her back on track. It is nice to have an extra adult in school to help kids with personal troubles that can interfere with school. Ms. McIntyre has helped hundreds of students while working there; she is a truly valuable counselor, mentor and friend to her. Don't let your budget cut my chance for success.

JULIET ADORNO (Student, Corcoran High School): Has known Ms. McIntyre for two years and she has helped her with many problems. Another reason you shouldn't take away the Student Assistance counselors at any of the high schools is because she wouldn't be the person she is today.

JENNIFER MOORHEAD (Student, Corcoran High School): Present to support Ms. McIntyre, she is a huge support to her as well as others, she is a great counselor who is always there for them. She is a positive force for all the people at Corcoran. If Ms. McIntyre leaves, they would lose a friend, a person who knows a lot about teenagers. Wishes they would leave the program the same, hopes Ms. McIntyre stays at Corcoran.

SHEILA O'HARA COUGHLIN (Student Assistance Program): STATEMENT ON FILE

SUSAN HURWITZ (Student Assistance Program): Ms. Hurwitz read a letter from Congressman Walsh – **LETTER ON FILE**

KEN WESTERS (Parent of Henninger High School student): He is a parent who knows the Student Assistance Program works. His son, on numerous occasions has talked with Ms. Hurwitz, and Mr. Westers sleeps better at night knowing things are in control. He questions how we can afford not to keep it going, the decision should be made not as Legislators or politicians, but as parents, as mothers and fathers who care about their children and maybe grandchildren. It is an invaluable program that all the schools benefit from. Mr. Westers submitted a petition supporting the Ms. Hurwitz and the Student assistance Program – **ON FILE**.

MARCY WEED (Student Assistance Program): **STATEMENT ON FILE**

KATHERINE KEELER (Student Assistance Program): Ms. Keeler said she is a thirty-five year County employee; the last thirty have been with the Mental Health Department. Asked the Legislators how they would feel if some day if they were told there was going to be a new system that some other agency was going to take over, that they would get paid a little less; you know your district and the people within it, but that doesn't matter because what is important is flexibility; we are going to save money but not going to because for every 5 cents that we save, we are also giving away 95 cents that comes from other sources; and we are really not going to save money because that other 5 cents is going that other agency that is going to employ some of you; don't know which one it will be but you can apply because it is a really good agency; make sure you handle your problems quickly, because you all have been maybe working a little too long with your constituents. You may be thinking this is not what you signed up for, you know your constituents, you know your district, this is what you do, that doesn't matter, this is new times and what is very important is that we save money and be flexible. Ms. Keeler said she works for the Outpatient Clinic with children and teens; she knows that if a Student Assistance counselor calls her about a child or teenager, that counselor has really worked hard with that child and that the child needs something extra, such as medication from a psychiatrist. It is a wonderful collaborative relationship, some people have been there for 23 years, program is excellent, employees are dedicated, have made great relationships with their students. You hear about tragedies in the community and a team assigned to deal with students, asked who they think does that, it is the Student assistance counselors who have years of experience and know their kids. Asked if they want the high turnover they would get in a non-profit agency, can't replace the years of experience. You are not going to be saving money, just destroying a program that is really working.

ANN BADGER (Retired Deputy Comm. of Mental Health Department): Worked in the County Department of Mental Health for 33 years as a social worker in an outpatient program, partial hospitalization program, as a supervisor, program director, agency director and the last ten years as the Deputy Commissioner in charge of Children's Services. Everyone has done a beautiful job of putting a face on the population, but thinks there a few things that have gone unsaid. Feels said that this came about in the manner in which it did, because one of the things it has done by going to the Legislature without anybody knowing about it, including the union, also, the proposal has been on line for agencies to write up responses to; it has pitted public services and private services against each other, some repair work is going to need to be made in that direction. Because Student Assistance is a great program doesn't mean that another agency wouldn't develop at great program. It is just that it was started in the County as a public service. The second issue is the loss of jobs without there being notices of major budget deficits. When something comes suddenly to employees about losing jobs, there is a ripple effect through all County employees that scares them that things are going to be done behind closed doors, that their jobs are not safe. Ms. Badger referred to early years when she worked with Mr. Brownell and they had two severe years of budget deficits, after many meetings it cam down to that they couldn't touch the private agencies, they had to take it in the direct services; the ones they chose to take were the ones that were not working. If you are a public agency, you are a target in terms of jobs, if you are a private agency, you can be very political and put a great deal of pressure on the County Executive. The qualifications for the Student Assistance counselors require them to have a Masters in Social Work; however, all of the Student Assistance counselors have the additional very hard to get seven year supervised experience certificate that calls them a Licensed Clinical Social Worker which enables them to do private practice, to bill Medicare, Medicaid and private insurance companies, they are very qualified. Ms. Badger said in her last year as Deputy Commissioner there was a new movement to reduce Medicaid costs, one of things everybody was worried about was the safety net. At that time, one of the best safety nets that they had for kids was the Student Assistance Program, all of the other services required people to have insurances. Student Assistance does not bill for services, they are on site, work with

other professionals; it is not easy to go into a host school and make it work, it is a credit to the counselors the County has that they have been able to do that.

MARYLYNN GUIDA (Corcoran High School): Has worked with Ms. McIntyre for five years, sees first hand what she does with all the students- what she provides, her support and expertise regarding services in helping encourage the young people to stay in the Corcoran community. The kids trust and respect her, value her insight and guidance. It would be an enormous loss to the Corcoran community if she were to leave; she has worked diligently for the past eleven years and knows the needs of the students. County Mental Health needs to keep this program under their wing to keep the best counselors in the positions for the young people of our community, don't outsource it.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 P.M.

Respectfully submitted,



Johanna H. Robb
Deputy Clerk